

AUTHOR Clawson, Thomas
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ABSTRACT

Certification of professional counselors is presently viewed in two realms, that of state regulation and of national voluntary credentialing. This digest considers national voluntary certification. The first national certification began in 1972; in 1983 the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) began certification for general practice counselors. Clinical mental health counselors and career counselors have merged with NBCC to become a specialty certification of the general practice of counseling. Across the realm of certifications in the counseling profession is the common thread of assessing individual counselors, training, supervision, experience, and knowledge; the similarities across the processes are remarkable. Other areas of assessment include job analysis and continuing training. Job analysis is not directly applied to the individual applicant for certification, but to a large group of practicing professionals. It is the precursor to assessment of certificants. Continuing training is an ongoing assessment practice that begins after credentialing is achieved. While counseling is an emerging profession, the NBCC has kept pace with national mandates for state-of-the-art assessment techniques. (JBj)

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The Role of Assessment in Counselor Certification

by Thomas Clawson

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The Role of Assessment in Counselor Certification

Thomas Clawson

Certification of professional counselors is presently viewed in two realms, that of state regulation and of national voluntary credentialing. Many states use the term certification in two contexts, school counselor certification and certification to practice counseling privately for a fee. In this digest, we will consider national voluntary certification only.

The first national certification began in 1972 with the incorporation of the Commission for Certification of Rehabilitation Counselors. In 1979, the National Academy for Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselors began certifying counselors trained in the specialty of clinical mental health counseling. Soon after, in 1984, the National Vocational Guidance Association (now the National Career Development Association) began certifying career counselors. In 1983, the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) began certification for general practice counselors. And, as this digest is being written, the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors is beginning a certification process. Clinical mental health counselors and career counselors have merged with the National Board for Certified Counselors to become a specialty certification of the general practice of counseling.

Across the realm of certifications in the counseling profession is the common thread of assessing individual counselors, training, supervision, experience, and knowledge; the similarities across the processes are remarkable.

Methods of Assessment

Counselor certification begins with individuals providing certification boards with a portfolio of data pertaining to their training, supervision, experience, and knowledge. All are areas of difficulty in quantifying or qualifying.

Training

Training is perhaps the easiest certification area to assess but even in evaluation of coursework, a variety of factors are evident. Most academic training reviews require determination of term (semester, trimester, quarter) hours awarded for graduate study in regionally accredited institutions. Course titles of counseling and related disciplines number in the thousands. Certification boards must categorize courses by reviewing catalogue course descriptions or syllabi. While quantifying transcript review appears to be a simple task, it consumes a great proportion of portfolio review time.

A further complication in determining appropriate training appears when certifying boards accept nontra-

ditional education. Processes must be developed that compare home study and other methods of delivery with traditional campus experiences. This may be done by designating which areas of study must be delivered by traditional professor/student/classroom methods and which courses may safely use nontraditional techniques such as distance learning. In counseling, the most important training dynamic is the demonstration of theory-to-practice transference. Topics requiring application of skills to counselees, such as group, individual, or family counseling and assessment of individuals or groups indicate the need for close supervision by a professor.

Supervision

Supervision duration is easily assessed if certification boards can define supervision and supervisors clearly. Then accurate reporting of supervision by supervisors establishes an hour total to judge against a standard number of hours. As the concept of certification has matured the qualification and definition of supervision has advanced. Defining and assessing supervision, however, is probably the least sophisticated and standardized certification area assessed at present. Bernard and Goodyear (1992) point out that as models of supervision grow the research and practice will bring forth clearer definitions.

Experience

Experience is easily quantified for assessment once standards and permutations are set. For example, certification boards may set a year or hour experience requirement and also set ways to accumulate hours of supervised experience at less than full time employment. Again, as certification evolves the ways of achieving experience have become more strict. In counseling, this is probably a result of the maturation of the profession.

Knowledge

Knowledge is relatively simple to assess if the universe of the information to be assessed is small. Counseling information included in the eight core areas of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs are as follows: 1) Human growth and development; 2) Social/cultural and family foundations; 3) The helping relationship (including counseling theories); 4) Group dynamics, processes, and counseling; 5) Lifestyle and career development; 6) Appraisal of individuals; 7) Research and evaluation; and 8) Professional orientation. These core areas are an example of the discipline producing more and more information as the research and literature base of counseling grows. Therefore, sampling the relevant knowledge base becomes an

increasingly difficult task. All counselor certification examinations employ multiple-choice, single-answer formats and range from 100 to 250 items per form.

Because the practice of counseling involves application of information to action, examination constructors face the task of applying knowledge data to cases or situations. The standard beginning point for this application is the job analysis or study of behaviors used in a profession. Most counselor certification exams are based upon comprehensive job analyses of practicing counselors. The National Organization for Competency Assurance requires state-of-the-art job analyses as a prerequisite for accreditation of certification programs (National Organization for Competency Assurance, 1993). Professional examinations which are not based upon comprehensive study of the necessary behaviors needed for professional practice are suspect even before reliability and validity statistics are gathered.

Job Analysis

Shimberg and Rosenfield (1980) identify the general purpose of job analyses as: a process that seeks information from a large number of incumbent practitioners regarding the most important aspects of the job; and the knowledge and skills needed to perform the job in a safe and effective manner (p.14).

Fine (1986) continues that job analyses can also provide definition of the behaviors needed to practice, knowledge and abilities needed in training curricula, and relevant assessments of performance (p. 55).

Loesch and Vacc (1993) describe job analyses as having multiple facets to obtain a picture of a profession. Three major categories of decisions must be considered in conducting a job analysis: a) conceptual; b) procedural; and c) analytical. Conceptual decisions as a basis for a credentialing examination is intended to allow for development of a "test blueprint." Procedural decisions include research methodology, type of examination format, and item generation technique. Analytical decisions involve the statistical and methodological treatment of the list of professional behaviors generated (pp.5-6).

So, job analysis is not directly applied to the individual applicant for certification, but to a large group of practicing professionals. It is the precursor to assessment of certificants and, indeed, essential for logical application of certification criteria.

Continuing Training

Continuing training is an ongoing assessment process that begins, for certification purposes, after credentialing is achieved. Most certifying boards require continuing education as a part of recertification. Some require both continuing education and re-examination periodically. The NBCC requires twenty clock hours of continuing education per year over each five year certification period. All certificants must attest to continuing their training and submit to random inspection.

Recommendations

Every national program certifying counselors uses multiple-choice examinations as part of the application requirement. While this method can assess information retention readily, it does not lend itself to measuring counseling skills and application of theory to skills. Recent revisions of the National Counselor Examination for Licensure and Certifi-

cation (NCE) have included more applied items. Future modifications should include methodologies that assess skills better. Tape simulations, computer applications, branching answer format, in vivo review, and case scenario models all may be included in future revision. These modifications, of course, have expense implications, which has been the major force in retention of multiple choice formats in counselor certification.

In an emerging profession such as counseling, an examination which is not undergoing change will soon be obsolete. Monitoring professional practice, research, and literature, as well as advances in examination development and theory are essential to a good assessment program.

The Clinical Mental Health Counselor Academy of the NBCC has always required a tape sample of counseling with a current counselee. This method requires extraordinary time expenditure by applicants for certification as well as tape reviewers. Each tape is reviewed by clinical counselors to assure clinical counseling skills. Clearly this process demands the most scrutiny of reliability (interrater in this case) of all NBCC processes. Ongoing reliability checks of tape review processes are a must. More research will no doubt help delineate better methods of judging tape samples.

Since NBCC has been gathering data on counselor behavior and examination statistics for over twelve years, the time has come to begin releasing these assessment data for use by those with interest in the profession. Such a process is now occurring beginning with the release of all data regarding the most recent and comprehensive job analysis performed within the counseling profession.

Requiring supervision for certification continues to generate a need for better definitions of supervision and qualification of supervisors. In a profession depending upon performance, supervision of pre-service and in-service counseling is essential. Not only will standards need to be developed further but some more quantifiable measures of supervision must emerge.

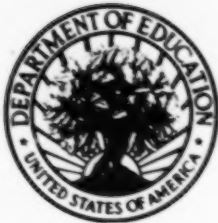
Summary

While counseling is an emerging profession, the NBCC has kept pace with national mandates for state-of-the-art assessment techniques. Present methods are constantly being modified in light of assessment advancements. Use of presently unreported data may lead to further positive steps in selecting certificants.

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- Thomas Clawson, Ed.D., NCC, is the Executive Director of the National Board for Certified Counselors in Greensboro, North Carolina.

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